Los Genízaros:

The Buffalo People Who Built Northern New Mexico

A True History Told from the Inside

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by

Bobby C. Espinoza

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Preface

Before You Turn the First Page

This is not a history book. It is a birth announcement three centuries late. Every name in these pages carries blood. Every date is a scar. Every acre of land still holds the warmth of the hands that first touched it after the rope came off. I did not write this to convince universities or politicians of anything. I wrote it because my daughter, Ricque, asked me at twenty why her DNA looked like a war and a love story at the same time—and I realized the honest answer could not be told before bedtime.

So, I began to dig.

I read parish books where priests wrote *indio rescatado* only to cross it out thirty years later and replace it with *español*. I sifted through land-grant petitions signed by women who could not write their names but could draw perfect maps of every acequia their husbands died defending. I listened in the kitchens of great-aunts who still lit candles on Friday night and told us to hush when the church bells rang on Saturday morning.

I found the same story repeated so many times it stopped sounding like history and started sounding like breath.

We were taken.

We were bought.

We were baptized.

We were given new names and old rifles.

We killed people who looked like the grandmothers we never met.

We married children who looked like the grandfathers who bought us.

We kept the land.

We lost the land.

We kept each other.

And somehow—against every intention Spain ever had, every law Mexico ever passed, and every court the Americans ever built—we kept the memory.

So why break the silence now, after three hundred years of guarding it like a candle lit only on Friday nights? Why me, when my tías warned, *"Forget I told you"*, and my great-grandfather spat into the fire before admitting we were *de la nación de los cautivos*?

Because Ricque's question wasn't curiosity.

It was the llano demanding an answer.

Her DNA didn't whisper; it shouted the war and the love story we had reduced to murmurs in kitchens. And in that moment, I saw the cost of silence: another generation checking "Hispanic" on forms, hearing the wind speak a language they don't know, losing deeds because we hid the titles too well.

Is there a cost to speaking? Yes.

Families might whisper that I'm airing secrets better left in the *morada*. Outsiders might flatten us again into "Spanish" or "Indian," missing the knot in between.

Courts and rangers might eye old grants we prefer to defend quietly. But the greater cost is erasure—the kind that lets the Americans measure our sky and fence our *ejidos*.

Has enough time passed? No.

Time doesn't make it safe.

It makes it necessary.

The Comanches are dust, the governor's footnotes—but the land remembers. And with kids like Ricque pressing their ears to the ground, waiting for hoofbeats, the memory will not stay buried.

It is breathing now.

This book is the sound of that breath finally speaking aloud.

If you are from somewhere else, read it as a love letter written in a language you do not yet speak.

If you are from here—Abiquiú, Truchas, Ojo Caliente, Canjilón, Tierra Amarilla, or anywhere the wind still smells of buffalo grass and piñon smoke—read it as the deed to the house you have always lived in, the one whose title was hidden in your abuela's trunk.

When you finish the last page, go outside. Press your ear to the ground.

You will hear hoofbeats.

They are not coming for you this time.

They are bringing you home.

—Canjilón, New Mexico, Winter 2025

Brief Guide to Words You'll Meet in This Book

Northern New Mexico has its own vocabulary—half Spanish, half older than Spanish, and all shaped by three centuries of survival. These are a few terms that matter for understanding the story that follows. I keep them short on purpose. The long explanations are in the pages ahead.

Genízaro

A word Spain used for Indigenous people—mostly Plains captives—brought into New Mexico through trade, war, or ransom. They were baptized, given Spanish surnames, and settled in frontier villages like Abiquiú, Ojo Caliente, Truchas, Las Trampas, San Miguel del Vado, and Belén.
Genízaros became soldiers, farmers, land-grant holders, and the backbone of the northern frontier.
The word disappeared from official records by 1820, but the people did not.

Rescate (The Ransom / The Trade)

A legal-religious system where Spanish officials bought captives—mostly children—from Comanches, Utes, Apache's, Navajos, and Kiowas.
On paper it was "rescuing souls."
In practice it was a structured market: mules, knives, blankets, and pesos exchanged for human lives.
Most Genízaro ancestors entered New Mexico this way.

Indio / Español / Mestizo / Coyote / Mulato (Casta Labels)

Colonial categories used by Spanish officials to classify people.
They were not identities—just bureaucratic boxes.
By the late 1700s these labels shifted constantly, usually moving toward "español," because that category came with land rights, legal protections, and less scrutiny.
Entire villages "whitened" on paper long before they did in memory.

Plaza

Not just a town square—more like a fortress made of families.
Houses faced inward, walls thick enough to stop an arrow, with one or two defended gates.
In Genízaro villages the plaza was also a school, a militia post, a churchyard, a marketplace, and the nerve center of survival.

Acequia

A community-built irrigation ditch.
It isn't just water; it's government, law, cooperation, inheritance, and identity.
Acequia rights in Genízaro villages were passed down like family names and defended harder than gold.

Land Grant

A legal document, usually signed by a Spanish governor, giving a community or individual families the right to settle, farm, and defend a piece of land.
Genízaros received some of the most significant grants in the north.
Many of these lands later became "public domain" under U.S. rule, but the original paper—and the memory—never vanished.

Morada / Hermanos / Matachines

Pieces of the spiritual world of northern New Mexico:

Morada – the meeting house of the Penitente brotherhood.
Hermanos (Penitentes) – lay religious men who prayed, served the poor, and maintained traditions older than the priests wanted to admit.
Matachines – dancers who perform elaborate ritual dances at feast days; the dance carries Indigenous, Spanish, and hidden meanings all at once.

The Llano

Literally "the plains."
Spiritually, it means the memory of the buffalo country many Genízaro ancestors came from—the sound in dreams, the wind in certain canyons, the old songs without Spanish words.

Why These Words Matter

Because without them, the story of northern New Mexico gets flattened into two categories— “Spanish” and “Indian”—when in truth the region was built by people who were neither and both.

These terms open the door to a world that has always existed here, even when the documents tried to erase it.

Prologue:

The Day My Tía Told Me Who We Really Were

I was nine, maybe ten, hiding behind the flour sack because Tía Lucy had told us to go play outside. She lit the lamp, set the plate of blue-corn atole on the windowsill for the dead, and started talking like the walls themselves were listening.

"El día que matamos a Cuerno Verde," she said, rolling tortillas so thin you could see the flame through them, "tus tatarabuelos cabalgaron doscientos contra dos mil. Y cuando bajó el sol, el comanche más bravo que jamás pisó la tierra estaba muerto y su cuerno verde roto en el polvo."

She never looked up from the comal.

"Y el que le cortó la melena y la trajo colgada en la lanza… era genízaro. Como nosotros. Como tú, mijo."

I felt the floor tilt under my knees. All my life, people had whispered that word like it was a curse. That night it sounded like a crown.

She put the last tortilla on the stack, wiped her hands on the apron, and said the sentence that changed everything:

"Ahora ya sabes por qué el viento todavía huele a sangre cuando pasa por el llano. Porque un día nosotros ganamos."

Chapter 1

The Taking of José Miguel –

Abiquiú - 25 October 1747

Fray Juan Miguel Menchero dipped his quill into iron-gall ink and wrote the line that would follow my family for nine generations:

"José Miguel, indio de nación Panana, de edad como de ocho años, rescatado de los comanches por el capitán de esta plaza don Antonio Archibeque, a quien se le entregó para que lo críe en la fe católica y le dé su apellido."

What he did **not** write was everything that mattered.

He did not write about how the boy screamed when they pulled him off the horse. He did not write that the Comanches had killed his mother and two sisters on the Arkansas River. He did not write about the raw, bleeding feet of a child who had run barefoot across the llano. He did not write the Pawnee words his mother whispered when she hid him in the tall grass:

"Stay small. Stay quiet. Live."

But he did write the new name they gave him:

José Miguel Archibeque.

Eight years old. Property. Saved.

I first heard the story from my tía Lucy in the kitchen of the old adobe on the county road outside Canjilón. She stirred green chile as if the boy were standing in the doorway.

"They brought him in on a rope, mijo. Barely taller than the stirrup. Eyes like a colt that's seen the wolf. Don Antonio paid twenty pesos and two mules for him—good money in those days. Said he

needed another son, since the Comanches had killed three of his own. Said God told him to buy the little Panana."

She laughed that dry Abiquiú laugh—the one people use when the truth is too heavy to carry straight.

"God didn't tell him anything. The governor told him. They needed bodies between the Comanches and Santa Fe, and a bought Indian was cheaper than a soldier from Chihuahua."

José Miguel learned Spanish the way you learn fire: fast, and with scars.

He learned to ride before he learned to read. At fifteen, he carried a lance longer than he was tall. At twenty, he was the best tracker in the Abiquiú militia—because he still dreamed in Pawnee and could read the llano the way his captors had taught him.

In 1766, when the Crown finally granted land to the Genízaros of Abiquiú, José Miguel—now thirty, married to a girl from Truchas whose own mother had been *rescatada* from the Apaches—signed the petition. The clerk wrote one word beside his name:

español

The word *indio* was crossed out. Quietly. Forever.

Two hundred and seventy-eight years later, I stood in the same plaza where they had tied him to a post the day he arrived. My daughter, Ricque, was taking pictures for a school project. She asked why the church door still had iron rings bolted to it.

"For tying up horses," I lied.

I didn't tell her that one of those rings once held an eight-year-old Pawnee boy while men counted the price of a human life in 1747.

I didn't tell her that the same boy became her sixth-great-grandfather.

I didn't tell her that every time she eats *chicos* with red chile, she is tasting the food his daughters learned from a mother who once ran barefoot across the same plains that stole her.

Some stories are too big for a twelve-year-old.

But this book is not for twelve-year-olds.

It is for the boy who stopped being José Miguel the Panana the day the rope went around his neck—and who started becoming northern New Mexico the day they cut it off.

It is for every descendant who has felt the llano wind hit their face and, for one instant, could not tell which language the wind was speaking.

We were the shield. We were the taken. And then—against every odd the eighteenth century stacked against a child—we became the land itself.

This is how it began.

What began as a single life taken into a foreign household did not end there.
It carried forward — renamed, repurposed, but never erased — waiting for the next generation to understand what had been inherited.

Chapter 2

The Price of a Soul

Santa Fe, late spring 1754

The plaza smelled of sweat, horses, and fear. They held the *rescate* in the open every year after Easter. Comanches, Utes, Apaches, Navajos, and Kiowas rode in under a white flag, leading lines of captives: women with babies tied to their backs, boys with rope burns around their necks, girls staring at the dirt as if they could disappear into it.

The governor called it *el rescate*.

Everyone else called it what it was: the market.

A priest stood on the steps of the Palacio with a ledger.

A soldier counted pesos.

A merchant weighed knives and blankets on a scale that always tilted toward the buyer.

Families from Abiquiú, Ojo Caliente, and Truchas lined up with whatever they had saved through winter—wool, hides, a few borrowed reales, promises they hoped a priest would honor.

My fourth-great-grandmother, **María Gertrudis Trujillo**, was bought that day.

She was seven.

Nation: Comanche.

Price: one mule, three knives, and thirty pesos "*para la limosna de la iglesia*."

Buyer: Don **José Martín Serrano** of Truchas, who already had nine children and no one to herd the sheep.

The priest recorded:

"María Gertrudis, *india comanche*, rescatada de los bárbaros, entregada a José Martín para que la críe en la santa fe católica… Se le impone el apellido Trujillo en honor a la madre adoptiva."

They gave her the mother's maiden name because the mother—my fifth-great-grandmother Ana María Trujillo—was the one who carried her home wrapped in a *rebozo*, singing a Spanish lullaby the little girl did not yet understand.

That night in Truchas, Ana María cut the rope from the child's wrists, washed the blood away with warm water, and said:

"Aquí no más te llaman *india*. Aquí eres mi hija."

María Gertrudis never saw the plains again.

But the plains never left her.

When she married a Genízaro from Abiquiú—Juan Antonio Archibeque, grandson of the Pawnee boy from Chapter 1—she taught her children a game: put your ear to the ground on a windy night, and you can hear the buffalo walking.

It became a family ritual.

My grandmother did it.

My tía Lucy did it.

I did it.

Ricque did it without knowing why.

The church called *rescate* an act of mercy.

The Comanches called it trade.

The children called it the day the sky changed color.

Between 1700 and 1780, more than three thousand Indigenous children—Pawnee, Apache, Kiowa, Ute, Comanche—were carried into New Mexico homes and baptized with Spanish names. All of them

fed into six villages: Abiquiú, Ojo Caliente, Las Trampas, Ranchos de Taos, San Miguel del Vado, and Belén.

By 1790, those villages had the highest land ownership per family in the province.

The shield had learned to hold the sword.

Then the plow.

Then the deed.

María Gertrudis lived to nearly ninety. The priest wrote her death as:

"María Gertrudis Trujillo, viuda, española."

No mention of Comanche.

No mention of the rope.

No mention that one of the strongest women in the three valleys once cost thirty pesos and a mule.

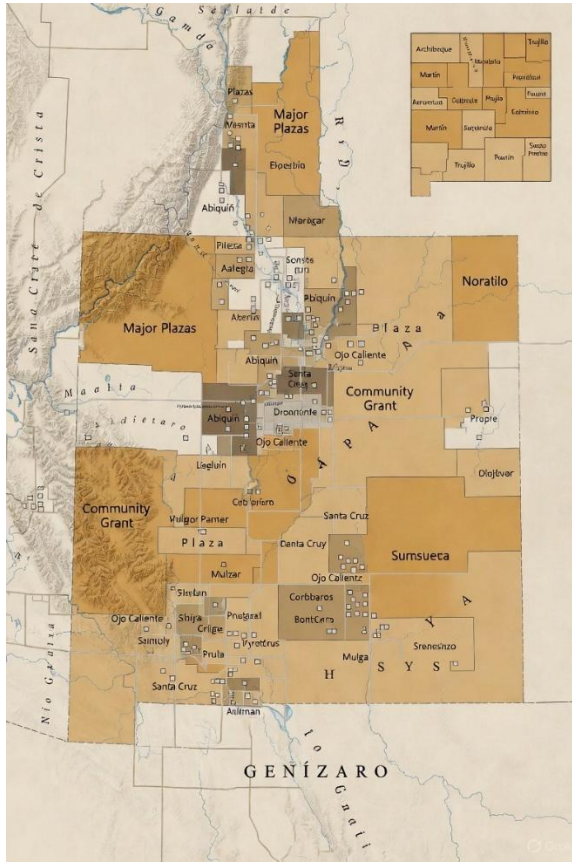
In New Mexico, the past never dies.

It just learns to speak Spanish when the priest is listening.

The world on the frontier never held still.

As one generation learned to survive within the walls of a plaza, another would find itself pushed outward again, into a wider and more dangerous landscape.

Figure 1


Major Plazas
Major Plazas
Noratilo
Community Grant
Community Grant
Sumsueca
Plaza
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Abiquín
Ojo Caliente
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Chapter 3

The Land They Were Promised

Abiquiú, 4 March 1754

Governor Tomás Vélez Cachupín stood on a low rise above the Río Chama, studying a valley no Spaniard had truly wanted—too exposed, too dry, too close to Comanche country.

Perfect.

That morning, he signed one of the most radical documents in the history of northern New Mexico. Then he handed the quill to **Francisco Treboles**, a Genízaro who could barely write his name but understood exactly what the paper meant.

Spain had decided to turn its former captives into its frontier army—and into landowners.

The grant read, in part:

"*... concedo a los vecinos genízaros de la nueva fundación de la Plaza de Abiquiú… las tierras que ocupan… para que las posean en común y las repartan entre sí y sus descendientes perpetuamente…*"

Forever. To them and to their children's children.

No rich family in Santa Fe received a grant that generous. No Peninsular Spaniard ever got language so clear.

The Genízaros understood immediately. They had been bought with pesos. Now they were being paid with mountains.

Within twenty years, the pattern repeated:

- **1765 — Las Trampas:** fifty Genízaro families, including Martín, Trujillo, and Archibeque lines.
- **1806 — Chama Valley private grants:** militia veterans, many children of captives.

- **1818 — Ojo Caliente:** half the signers listed as *indios genízaros* in 1790, all "español" by 1820.

They built plazas like fortresses. Acequias that still run today. Moradas with no north windows. Houses thick enough to stop arrows.

They married each other—keeping land, memory, and bloodlines tightly woven.

My cousin Rubel still farms the exact strip his Genízaro ancestor received in 1765. The acequia is still called *La Acequia de los Genízaros*. When the Forest Service tried to close it in 1998, Rubel brought out the 1765 grant.

They left the same day.

The old people said it simply:

"Los españoles trajeron la cruz.

Los indios trajeron la tierra.

Los genízaros se quedaron con las dos."

(The Spaniards brought the cross.

The Indians brought the land.

The Genízaros kept both.)

By 1800, the average Genízaro family in Abiquiú owned more irrigated acres, more sheep, and more militia rifles than the old Santa Fe elite.

Spain never realized what it created when it handed those plains captives a rifle and a deed.

It created **us**.

You Can Still Walk the Edges

Stand with me for a moment on the mesa above Abiquiú—*La Mesa de los Genízaros.* Trace the 1754 grant in the air:

East to the red wall of the Piedra Lumbre.

West across the Chama into the canyons.

North to the Colorado line.

South to the badlands where the Navajo rode.

Every arroyo has a Spanish name now, but every bend in the river remembers another.

Walk down past the Plaza Blanca, and you cross the old *acequia madre.* The headgate is gone, but the ditch still runs exactly where Francisco Treboles and twenty others dug it with willow tools in 1754.

My cousin Orlando still opens the *compuerta* each May with the same wooden key carved in 1755.

That isn't folklore. That's the title.

Near the ruins of the original plaza, if you kick the dirt, you'll find pieces of Majolica pottery mixed with shards of Pawnee cooking pots.

The ground refuses to choose sides.

The Americans arrived in 1848 and said, "Show us your papers."

The Genízaros produced grants signed by kings.

The Americans shrugged and said, "These are community grants. We only recognize individual deeds."

But dirt has memory. The land knows its people.

Every spring, when the snowmelt turns the acequias brown, when an Archibeque or Trujillo plants chile on land their ancestors defended with blood, when a child feels the wind and suddenly hears a rhythm older than Spanish—the 1754 grant is still speaking.

Spain gave us the paper.

The plains gave us the children.

We gave the children the land.

And the land never let go.

History shifted like weather in these mountains: suddenly, decisively, without asking permission.

The families who stood in its path had no choice but to bend, endure, and keep their names alive in the dust behind them.

Chapter 4

The Quiet Erasure

1790 -Plaza de Abiquiú

The census taker was a nervous young man from Chihuahua named don Cayetano Rodríguez. He had been told to count every soul "según su calidad," the old Spanish categories—español, mestizo, coyote, indio, genízaro, mulato. He carried a thick book and a bottle of ink that froze at night.

He started at the house of my fifth-great-grandfather, Juan Antonio Archibeque (the grandson of the Pawnee boy bought in 1747). Don Cayetano knocked. Juan Antonio opened the door wearing a clean wool jacket, silver buttons, and the calm stare of a man who had killed Comanches for Spain and now owned half the valley. The clerk asked the required question: "¿De qué calidad es usted y su familia?"

Juan Antonio did not hesitate. "Españoles", he said. "Todos españoles."

The clerk looked at the children playing in the yard—dark, straight-haired, barefoot in October—then at the wife stirring beans over the fire, then back at the man who had only six years earlier signed militia rosters as "Juan Antonio Archibeque, capitán de genízaros." He opened his mouth, closed it, dipped his pen, and wrote:

Juan Antonio Archibeque, español, 48 años

María Gertrudis Trujillo, su mujer, española, 43 años

y ocho hijos, todos españoles.

No one told him to lie. No one had to. Twenty houses later, he wrote the same thing for José Martín Serrano, for Pedro Quintana, for

Antonio José Vigil—men who had been listed as *indio genízaro* in the 1750s revistos. By the time Don Cayetano reached the end of the plaza, the word *genízaro* had disappeared from his book as completely as if it had never existed.

In Santa Fe, the governor read the finished census and smiled. Fewer "indios" meant fewer taxes owed to the Crown for Indian tribute. Fewer "genízaros" made the north look more civilized on paper. Everyone won—except history.

A decade later, another census came through; the clerk copied the 1790 entries and changed the ages. By 1821, when Mexico declared its independence, the word *genízaro* was no longer in use. The new republic proclaimed all citizens equal. Conveniently, it never had to admit that half of northern New Mexico had been something else only thirty years before.

Paper is patient, but people have memories. My tía Panchita in Truchas kept a little leather-bound book that belonged to her grandfather (born in 1815). On the inside cover he had written, in perfect Spanish cursive: *"Yo soy genízaro de pura cepa, aunque el cura me puso español para que no me cobraran el tributo. Que mis nietos sepan la verdad."*

She showed me that page when I was fifteen, then closed the book and said, "Now forget I told you. Out there, they still don't like the word."

We became people who vanished on purpose. We learned to check the box that said "Hispanic/Spanish origin" on every government form because the box that should have said "Genízaro" was never printed. We learned to say, "My family's been here since before the Mayflower," and let strangers' picture bearded conquistadors instead of eight-year-old captives with rope burns. We kept the real story for the kitchen, for after the rosary, for when the kids were supposed to be asleep.

And still, every once in a while, the mask slipped. In 1934, a WPA writer interviewed old-timers in Abiquiú and asked my great-grandfather, Nicasio Archibeque, where his people came from. He spat in the fire and answered: “De la nación de los cautivos, hijo. Pero dile al gobierno que somos españoles, no vaya a ser que nos quiten la tierra otra vez.”

The clerk in 1790 started it with a stroke of ink. We finished it in silence. And silence, it turns out, is the most effective whitening agent New Mexico ever invented.

What came next was not a break, but a continuation — another turning of the same old wheel.

The same land, the same fears, the same resilience, passed from one set of hands to the next.

Chapter 5

The Women Who Owned the Mountains

Chama Valley, winter of 1814

That year, the men left at dawn—forty-three riders from Abiquiú and Ojo Caliente, chasing a Navajo war party that had run off two hundred sheep. They came back at dusk, in pieces: fourteen dead, six so badly wounded they would never ride again, and the flock still gone.

That night, the widows gathered in the house of **María Rita Quintana**, widow of José Miguel Archibeque (the same José Miguel who had been bought as a Pawnee boy seventy years earlier). She was sixty-eight, straight as a piñon, and the only person in the valley who still kept the original 1754 grant folded inside a rawhide tube above the vigas. She laid the yellowed paper on the table like a deck of cards and told the women, “La tierra no se muere porque se mueran los hombres. La tierra se queda con quien la trabaja y la defiende. Y esta noche somos nosotras.”

She divided the grant into strips—one for every widow, one for every orphaned daughter old enough to hold a hoe—and made them swear on the bones of their husbands never to sell outside the family. They kept that oath for a century and a half. María Rita died in 1849. When the American probate judge came from Santa Fe to inventory her estate, he wrote in perfect English:

Property of Rita Quintana, Spanish woman, deceased:

4,800 varas of irrigated land on the Nutritas

1,200 sheep

one house of eight rooms

water rights in the Acequia de los Genízaros

no debts.

He never wrote the word widow. He never noted that she had run the largest ranch in the Chama Valley for thirty-five years under three flags.

She was not the only woman who took the land into her hands. **Augustina Ortega** of Las Trampas assumed her husband's grant after he fell in 1805; by 1830, she owned more sheep than any man in Taos County and paid the priest in silver she had minted herself from ore her sons pulled from Picurís. **María Florida Solano** of Ojo Caliente inherited 6,000 varas along the río after the 1821 campaign; she married again, outlived her second husband, and in 1888 left the land to her daughters with a single written command: *"Que nunca se venda a hombre que no lleve nuestra sangre."* (Never sell to a man who does not carry our blood.)

Josefa Martín of Ranchos de Taos defended her irrigation rights in an American courtroom in 1876, armed only with a 1765 grant and the memory of the men who had died keeping the Comanches off that ditch. The judge ruled in her favor—and in the record she appears as "a Spanish lady of evident refinement."

They did not call themselves feminists. They called themselves **viudas con tierra**—widows with land. In a place where men rode off and died young, the women who lived into old age became the banks, the archives, the government, and the militia. When the Texas-Santa Fe expedition of 1841 rode into the Chama Valley on the hunt for easy conquests, they met **Ana María Archibeque**—María Rita's daughter-in-law—standing in the road with a rifle older than the Republic of Texas. They turned around.

The land remained in female hands for so long that by the 1880s, the largest landowners in the Río Arriba were women with Genízaro surnames, signing their names with a flourish and no apology. The songs told of riding and dying; the deeds were written by the women. And the deeds outlasted the songs.

So, when lawyers, tax collectors, and surveyors later tried to reduce the communal fabric to lines on a map, these women and their

descendants reminded the courts, and the rangers that title was not just ink but memory and work. They kept the water, the seed, the key to the *compuerta*, and the oath. In the end, the mountains learned who would tend them.

Even silence had a lineage.

What the elders could not say, the children learned anyway, piecing together truth from fragments carried in tone and gesture and prayer.

Chapter 6

The Day We Killed Cuerno Verde

Abiquiu, 3 September 1779

The scouts rode in at dusk, half-dead, horses lathered white. “Cuerno Verde viene con todo el poder comanche. Dos mil lanzas. Van a borrar los pueblos del norte.” For thirty years, the Comanche chief called Cuerno Verde (Green Horn) had worn a great green-painted buffalo horn on his war bonnet. He had killed governors, burned Taos, and emptied entire valleys. Spanish soldiers from Chihuahua ran from him. Pueblo warriors hid when they heard his name. But he had never met the Genízaros of Abiquiú at home. Captain José Miguel Archibeque (my fourth-great-grandfather, grandson of the Pawnee boy) called the plaza roll at sunrise.

Every man over fourteen answered.

Every woman loaded rifles and baked tortillas for the trail. Two hundred and twenty Genízaros saddled up, plus eighty Pueblo auxiliaries from San Juan and Picurís, plus forty Spanish soldiers who had no choice but to follow. They rode south under a war banner nobody remembers now: black wool with a red cross and the words “Ave María Purísima.” They met Cuerno Verde on the plains of Colorado, near a green river the Comanches still call the place of their great mourning. The fight lasted one afternoon. When the sun dropped behind the Sangre de Cristos, Cuerno Verde was dead, his green horn broken in the dust, his son dead beside him, six hundred Comanche warriors scattered or bleeding out on the grass.

The Genízaros lost twenty-nine. They cut the chief’s scalp lock and carried it back to Abiquiú tied to a lance. Governor Juan Bautista de Anza sent it on to Mexico City with a short note: “La frontera norte está segura gracias a los genízaros de Abiquiú y Ojo Caliente. “He never mentioned that almost every man who rode that day had been born on the other side of captivity. They came home singing alabados in Spanish and something older that had no words. My tío Orlando still

has the lance head that carried Cuerno Verde's scalp. It's iron, hand-forged, black with age. He keeps it above the door "para que los malos espíritus se acuerden." That single afternoon changed everything. After 1779, the great Comanche raids stopped cold.

The buffalo road shifted east.

The villages of the Río Arriba finally slept without sentries on the rooftops. The king of Spain sent medals (gold for the officers, silver for the rest).

Most of the Genízaros traded theirs for sheep or buried them with their dead. They knew what the medals really meant:

You were the shield, and the shield did its job. In 1786, seven years after the battle, Spain signed a peace treaty with the Comanches.

The first article required the Comanches to return every captive still living in their camps. Hundreds came home (some walking, some carried).

Many of them were the little brothers and sisters of the same men who had killed Cuerno Verde. They rode into Abiquiú plaza in rags and were wrapped in wool blankets by the same hands that had pulled triggers a few years earlier. Forgiveness is a northern New Mexico specialty. We needed it.

We were all somebody's captive once. The war ended, but the memory never did. Every year on the third of September, the old people in Canjilón still put a plate of blue corn atole outside the door "para los que no regresaron." They don't say whether they mean the twenty-nine Genízaros or the six hundred Comanches. Maybe both. Because after that day on the green river, the llano finally understood:

The people who had once been taken had become the ones who could never be moved.

As the world around them changed, the people changed with it — but never in the ways outsiders assumed.
They adapted, endured, and wove new lives out of old memory.

Chapter 7

The Knot

Abiquiú, 12 February 1804

Fray José Ignacio Flores wrote three lines that look innocent on yellowed paper, but they locked the circle forever:

“Juan José Archibeque, genízaro, viudo de María Gertrudis Trujillo, con María Josefa Quintana, hija legítima de Pedro Quintana y María Manuela Martín,

ambos genízaros de esta plaza.”

One wedding.

Four of the strongest Genízaro surnames in the valley.

All in the same bed. That was not an accident.

That was policy. By 1800, if you stood in the plaza of Abiquiú on a Sunday after Mass and threw a rock, you hit somebody related to everybody else within three degrees.

The same in Truchas, in Ojo Caliente, in Las Trampas, in Chama. Outsiders called it endogamy.

We called it survival. When your grandfather had been bought for thirty pesos and your grandmother was carried off at age six, you did not marry the daughter of some rico from Santa Fe who would look down on your blood.

You married the girl whose mother still knew how to butcher a buffalo the Plains way, whose father rode with you against Cuerno Verde, whose family already held the next strip of the acequia. You married inside the knot. Look at any page of the Abiquiú marriage

book between 1780 and 1850, and you see the same eight or ten surnames dancing in circles:

Archibeque × Trujillo

Trujillo × Quintana

Quintana × Martín

Martín × Montaño

Montaño × Vigil

Vigil × Rael

Rael × Archibeque again over and over until the priest stopped asking where people were from and just wrote “de esta plaza” every time. By 1840, the knot was so tight that when my third-great-grandfather José Miguel Archibeque married María Concepción Martín in 1842, the priest added a note in the margin: “Parientes en tercer grado, dispensado por el obispo. “Third cousins.

Dispensation granted because there was literally nobody left in the valley who wasn’t a third cousin. The knot did three things nobody talks about:

1. It kept the land whole.
2. Every marriage was a merger of adjacent strips along the same acequia. By 1880, the biggest ranches in the Chama Valley weren’t owned by Anglos or Santa Fe ricos; they were owned by interlocking Genízaro cousins who would sooner burn the deed than sell one vara to an outsider.
3. It kept the memory alive.

4. When you marry the granddaughter of a woman who was carried off by Comanches in 1795, you grow up hearing the story in the first person. The captivity never becomes folklore; it stays family.
5. It created a people nobody else can imitate.
6. The Spanish rhythm in the speech, the Indian rhythm in the cooking, the way we bury our dead facing east, even though the church says west, the way we still dance the Comanche on New Year's Eve with eagle feathers hidden under the matachines costumes—none of that came from books. It came from marrying each other until the memories fused.

My wife, Joelina, and I proved the knot is still alive. When we started filling out our family trees, we found the same names on both sides: Archibeque, Trujillo, Quintana, Martín, and Rael.

We are eighth cousins at least three different ways.

Our kids are walking proof that the circle never broke. In 1935, an anthropologist from Texas came to Abiquiú looking for "pure Indian types" to photograph.

The old men laughed, sent him to the Pueblo, and then went back to marrying their cousins. He never understood that by then we weren't Spanish, weren't Indian, weren't mestizo in any way the university understood. We were the knot. And the knot doesn't unravel.

Every uprising, every loss, every migration sent a tremor through the families who remained.
And those tremors, softened by time, became the stories the next generation grew up within.

Chapter 8

The Things We Never Told the Priest

Canjilón, 1948

My tía Lucy was ninety-two, blind in one eye, and still the best cook in the valley.

On a Friday night in December, she lit the kerosene lamp, set two candles on the windowsill, and told me and my cousin Rubel to go play outside. We didn't.

We hid behind the woodstove and watched. She lit the candles at sundown, exactly when the church said not to.

She covered her head with the black rebozo she only wore for funerals.

She whispered something in a language that wasn't Spanish and wasn't Tewa. When she turned and saw us staring, she didn't scold.

She just said, "Some fires you don't let the padre see. "That was the first time I understood: we never stopped being Plains children.

We just learned to hide it better than anyone else. The list is long if you know where to look:

- Friday night candles, no matches left in the house until Saturday sundown.
- Certain families in Truchas who never ate pork never explained why.
- The rule about cutting the tips off chicken wings and burying them separately from the body.
- The way some old women swept the floor toward the door on Friday afternoon, "so the week can leave."

- The buffalo stone my tío Nicasio kept wrapped in red cloth inside the family Bible (he said it came from a Pawnee grandmother who crossed the llano barefoot in 1752).
- Dreams that hit the same bloodline every generation: running across grass taller than your head while thunder walks on four legs.

We hid them the way you hide a scar you're not ashamed of but don't want questioned. The priests wrote "español" and "buen cristiano" in the books.

We nodded, crossed ourselves, and went home to light Friday candles. In 1997, my cousin Orlando took a DNA test for fun.

The results came back 28 % Plains Indian, 9 % Ashkenazi Jewish, 0 % Pueblo.

He laughed until he cried and said, "See? The llano and the desert both kept their promise. "The Pueblo people kept the ceremonies in kivas.

The Hispanos kept the saints on the altars.

We kept the in-between things: the things you do when the church door is closed, and the wind comes down off the buffalo plains. Every New Year's Eve in Abiquiú and Truchas, the matachines dance the Comanche.

The dancers wear black fringe and eagle feathers hidden under silk scarves.

The Church calls it a Moorish dance from Spain.

The old men wink and say, "Sí, muy moro… pero los moros nunca vieron un búfalo." In 1963, a priest in Chama tried to ban the Comanche dance because "it was too Indian."

The entire village showed up to the next Mass carrying the dance costumes under their coats.

The priest preached his shortest homily ever and never mentioned it again. We never needed to revolt.

We just kept doing what our captive grandmothers did, quietly, stubbornly, forever. The candles still burn on Friday nights in certain houses from Tierra Amarilla to Las Trampas.

The buffalo stone still rides in glove boxes on the way to funerals.

The dreams still come. We never told the priest because the priest already had his story.

We had ours. And ours never needed permission.

The land grants held more than boundaries; they held the long breath of a people trying to keep hold of themselves.
Each dispute, each petition, each stand taken was another way of saying: we are still here.

Chapter 9

The Year the Río Arriba Burned Twice

Chimayó, 8 August 1837

They hanged them from cottonwoods along the road to Santa Cruz. Six men swinging in the morning wind:

José Ángel González

Manuel Cortés

José Antonio García

Antonio José Archibeque

Juan José Quintana

Pedro Vigil, All Genízaros or sons of Genízaros.

All were born on the same land their grandfathers had been granted for killing Comanches.

All dead before breakfast for refusing to pay the new taxes the rico governor from Santa Fe had invented. The rebellion had lasted nine days. It started in the north (Chimayó, Truchas, Las Trampas), where the old Genízaro villages still governed themselves like small republics. The new Mexican government in Santa Fe wanted money, real money, not sheep or promises. They sent tax collectors with soldiers.

The collectors never came back.

On 1 August 1837, the men of the Río Arriba declared the "Cantón de Chimayó" and elected a Genízaro from Taos Pueblo as governor: José Gonzales, dark, quiet, who spoke Spanish with the accent of someone who had learned it after another tongue. He lasted exactly one week. Governor Albino Pérez rode north with four hundred troops.

He lost his head on the road to Agua Negra.

The rebels carried it back to Santa Fe in a basket. Then the counter-revolution came. Manuel Armijo (rich, fat, and terrified) bought the loyalty of the Pueblo warriors with promises and whiskey. On 10 August, the Pueblos and Armijo's mercenaries trapped the last rebels in the church at Chimayó. The six men hanged that morning were the ones who refused to surrender. My cousin Rubel still has the rosary that belonged to Antonio José Archibeque.

It is made of buffalo bone, blackened by three centuries of hands.

He says when you hold it you can still feel the rope. Ten years later, it happened again.

Taos, 19 January 1847

The second rebellion started the same way: taxes, land theft, and Americans who didn't understand why northern New Mexicans refused to act conquered. This time, the Genízaros were on both sides. The rebels killed Governor Charles Bent in his own house and dragged his scalp through the plaza.

Leading the mob: Pablo Montoya (Genízaro from Truchas) and Tomás Romero (Genízaro from Abiquiú).

Holding the fort against them: Ceran St. Vrain and fifty American trappers, plus a company of Genízaro militia from Abiquiú who had taken the American side for pay and promises. On 4 February, the U.S. Army shelled the church in Taos where the last rebels had barricaded themselves with their wives and children. When the smoke cleared, the firing squad executed fifteen men in the plaza. Seven of the fifteen had Genízaro surnames from the same six villages that had killed Cuerno Verde seventy years earlier. The Americans wrote in their reports: "The insurrection was purely an Indian affair. "They never understood that the "Indians" had been Spanish citizens longer than most of the soldiers had been alive, and that they were fighting for the same thing

their captive grandmothers had died protecting: the land. After 1847, the knot tightened harder than ever. We stopped rebelling in public.

We started disappearing the story again. The descendants of the hanged men and the descendants of the executioners kept marrying each other, kept sharing acequias, kept baptizing each other's babies. Because in the Río Arriba, blood forgives faster than governments do. My great-grandfather used to say the real tragedy of 1837 and 1847 wasn't the dead. It was after those two mornings of hanging bodies, the word genízaro finally died for good. We buried it with the men in the cottonwoods and never spoke it aloud again. Until now.

When the old world finally collided with the new one, it didn't break cleanly.
Pieces of both lodged in the hearts of the families who lived through it, shaping the stories that followed.

Chapter 10

Tierra Amarilla, 22 June 1967

The courthouse door exploded inward at 10:17 a.m. Reies López Tijerina (thin, furious, and carrying a .30-30 carbine) stepped over the splintered wood and shouted the sentence northern New Mexico had waited two hundred years to hear again: “¡Esta tierra es nuestra! ¡Es de los genízaros y sus descendientes!” The words hit the room like a match in dry grass. The sheriff’s deputies froze.

The reporters scribbled so fast their pencils snapped.

The old men sitting in the back (men with Trujillo, Archibeque, and Quintana faces) felt something loosen in their chests that they hadn’t known was knotted. Reies was not guessing.

He had spent ten years in the archives, digging up the same yellowed grants María Rita Quintana had laid on the table in 1814.

He knew every vara of the Tierra Amarilla Land Grant had been given to Genízaro families in the 1790s and 1830s.

He knew the United States had stolen it piece by piece (first with lawyers, then with taxes, finally with barbed wire). And on that June morning, he decided the silence ended now. The raid lasted twelve minutes.

Two men were wounded.

No one was killed.

But the echo lasted forever. They arrested Reies and eleven others.

The state tried him three times.

Every time, the jury (half Hispano, half Anglo) refused to convict on the big charges.

One juror from Chama told the judge, “You can’t put a man in prison for reading his own grandfather’s deed out loud. “While Reies sat in jail, the old people started talking again. In kitchens from

Abiquiú to Las Trampas, in the back of pickup trucks on the road to the forest permits office, in the bars in Española after closing, the word came back from the grave: Genízaro. Not as an insult.

Not as a secret.

As a title. My tío Orlando was thirty-four that summer.

He drove to the courthouse raid with a carload of cousins from Canjilón.

They didn't go inside (too many kids at home), but they stood across the road with rifles they never raised and eyes that never blinked. He told me years later, "We didn't go for Reies.

We went because somebody finally said it in front of the gringos and didn't get hanged for it." The raid failed.

The land didn't come back.

But something bigger did. After 1967, the Forest Service stopped closing acequias without a fight.

The universities started hiring young Nuevomexicanos who wrote "Genízaro studies" in their grant applications.

The old men stopped lowering their voices when they told the captivity stories. In 1988, the New Mexico legislature quietly passed a resolution acknowledging that the Tierra Amarilla Grant had been "taken by fraud and force from its original Hispanic and Genízaro heirs. "They never gave the land back.

But they said the word. And once the word was said in daylight, it could never be buried again. Reies died in 2015.

They buried him in Coyote, under a simple stone that says: Aqui yace un hombre que nunca se olvidó de dónde venía. Here lies a man who never forgot where he came from. On the day of the funeral, five hundred people showed up (ranchers, professors, activists, kids with fresh DNA results in their pockets).

Half of them were Archibeques, Trujillos, Quintanas, Martíns, Raels, or Bacas in one direction or another. The knot had come full circle. The raid didn’t win the land.

It won the name. And the name, finally, was enough.

Time pushed forward, but memory didn’t follow the same straight path.
It looped, circled back, and returned to the same questions the ancestors once faced.

Chapter 11

The Tubes of Spit

The email arrived at 9:14 on a Tuesday morning in March 2024.

I was in the kitchen making coffee. Joelina was folding laundry. Ricque, twenty-three now, home from Colorado Springs for the weekend, was still asleep on the couch with the dog on her chest.

The subject line was nothing dramatic:

Your AncestryDNA® Results Are In.

I opened it on my phone first, because I'm the impatient one.

The pie chart loaded slowly, like it knew what it was about to do. Indigenous Americas – Mexico …… 15 %

Indigenous Americas – Canada & United States … 2 %

France (new) …… 4 %

The Netherlands …… 5 %

Ashkenazi Jews – Central & SE Europe …… 2 %

Sephardic Jews – Eastern Mediterranean …… 2 %

Sephardic Jews – North Africa …… 1 %

Total Jewish: 5 %

Total llano signature: 17 %

Seventeen percent of me is still running across the grass trying to get home…and the other eighty-three percent is what happened after they caught me.

I stared so long the screen dimmed.

I turned the phone face down, walked to the living room, and stood over Ricque until her eyes opened. "Ven," I said. My voice cracked on the single word.

She sat up. The dog slid to the floor. Joelina came in behind me, dish towel still in her hands.

I handed Ricque the phone without speaking.

She read it once, fast, the way she reads everything.

Then she read it again, slower, thumb frozen on the screen.

The house went quieter than I have ever known it.

Not the quiet of no sound.

The quiet that comes right after an explosion when your ears are ringing, and the world hasn't decided yet whether to start moving again.

Ricque's mouth opened, closed, opened again.

Nothing came out.

She looked at the 17 % Plains slice glowing on the screen, then at me, then at Joelina, then back at the screen as if the numbers might rearrange themselves if she stared hard enough.

Finally, she whispered, so low I almost missed it:

"Dad… seventeen percent of me is still barefoot on the llano…

and the rest of me is the reason she never made it home."

That was all. She set the phone on the coffee table like it was hot. Then she folded forward, forehead on her knees, and started crying the way little kids cry: no sound, just shaking.

Joelina dropped the towel and sat beside her.

I stayed standing because my legs had forgotten how to bend.

Minutes passed. Maybe ten. Maybe thirty.

The coffee finished gurgling in the kitchen, and nobody moved to get it.

Ricque lifted her head. Her eyes were red but fierce.

“Show me Mom’s,” she said.

I already had Joelina’s results open in another tab.

38 % Indigenous Americas.

A pie chart that looked like a sunrise over the plains.

Ricque stared at both screens side by side for a long time.

Then she laughed once: short, sharp, astonished.

“So together we make one whole Plains Indian who finally walked all the way home and decided to stay. “She said it without drama.

Just fact.

Like she was reading the weather.

But the room cracked open anyway.

I felt the llano wind move through the house, cold and smelling of buffalo grass and iron.

I felt every abuela who ever pressed her ear to the ground, waiting for hoofbeats that never came.

I felt the rope around José Miguel’s neck loosen, just a little.

Ricque wiped her face with the sleeve of the hoodie she’d stolen from me in high school.

“Dad,” she said, voice steady now, “when you write the book, don’t pretty this part up.

Tell them the quiet lasted so long we could hear the percentages breathing.

” So here it is.

That morning, the house held its breath for the length of an entire childhood.

And when it finally exhaled, something older than all of us walked in and sat down at the table as it had always belonged there.

The tubes of spit didn't tell us who we are.

They just handed us the mirror we'd spent three hundred years trying not to look into.

And for the first time, nobody blinked.

What survived into the modern years was not just name or blood, but a way of belonging — quiet, persistent, threaded through generations.
And it waited for someone willing to listen closely enough to hear it.

Chapter 12

The Year the Americans Came to Measure the Sky

Santa Fe, Taos, and Abiquiú, 1848-1900

They arrived with brass instruments that looked like guns made of sunlight.

Theodolites, chains, sextants, solar compasses—tools meant to pin the heavens to the earth and then sell the earth by the inch. The surveyors wore black coats even in July and spoke English the way priests once spoke Latin: as if the language itself could make the land forget its old names. In 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo promised that every land grant signed by Spain or Mexico would be "inviolably respected."

The Genízaros of the Río Arriba heard that promise and believed it the way their grandmothers had once believed the word rescate meant rescue. They were wrong both times. The first betrayal came quietly, on paper.

Community grants—mercedes given to entire plazas, not to single men—were foreign to American law. In Washington, they only understood private deeds. So, the Surveyor General of New Mexico, a man named William Pelham who had never seen an acequia in his life, ruled that unless a grant had been issued to a specific person with exact boundaries drawn in ink, it belonged to the United States. Mountains became public domain overnight. The second betrayal came with taxes.

In 1876, my third-great-grandmother, María Concepción Martín (widow of José Miguel Archibeque and owner of 6,200 varas along the Nutritas), received a tax bill for $187. She had 1,400 sheep, three adobe rooms, and no coins with eagles on them. She sold 900 sheep to pay for it. The next year, the bill was higher. By 1881, the land was auctioned on the courthouse steps in Tierra Amarilla to a lawyer from Denver who had never seen the Chama Valley except on a map. He paid twelve cents an acre. The third betrayal was the fence.

Barbed wire arrived in carloads after 1885. Texas cattle companies strung it across the old ejidos—the common grazing lands every Genízaro plaza had used since 1754. When the Archibeques and Trujillos cut the wire to water their sheep, the companies sent armed guards. When the guards shot first, the newspapers called it “range war” and blamed “lawless Mexicans. “In 1892, a company of the 9th Cavalry—Black Buffalo Soldiers fresh from the Apache campaigns—was ordered to Abiquiú to “keep order.” The old men watched the blue coats ride in and muttered, “Ahora los búfalos vienen del otro lado.” Now the buffalo come from the other side. Some families fought in court for seventy years.

The Court of Private Land Claims, created in 1891, heard 312 Spanish and Mexican grants. It confirmed only 82. Every Genízaro community grant—Abiquiú, Las Trampas, Truchas, Ojo Caliente—was rejected or reduced to a postage stamp. The judges ruled that collective ownership was “repugnant to American principles.” One judge wrote that Genízaros had been “mere squatters” on land Spain gave them for killing Comanches.

The widows read the decision aloud in Spanish, then folded the paper and used it to start the cookfire. But the deepest cut was the census. In 1880, the U.S. census takers rode into the plazas with new instructions: everyone must be either White, Indian, or Negro. There was no box for people who had been indios rescatados in 1750 and españoles in 1790. So, the census taker looked at skin, at language, at the cut of a jacket, and wrote “White” for some families and “Indian” for their cousins across the acequia. Overnight, the knot unraveled on paper.

Archibeques who had signed the 1754 grant as españoles became “White.” Their Quintana cousins, who still spoke with the rhythm of the llano became “Indian.” Brothers checked different boxes. The same blood, measured by strangers with brass instruments. My tía Lucy’s grandfather, Nicasio Archibeque, was listed as “Indian” in 1880, “White” in 1900, and “Mexican” in 1910—always by the same government, always on the same forty acres his captive Pawnee

ancestor had irrigated since 1766. By 1900, the great ranches were gone.

The sheep were gone.

The ejidos were fenced.

The children were marched off to boarding schools in Santa Fe and Albuquerque, where nuns beat the Spanish out of them and taught them to be ashamed of the grandmothers who had once owned mountains. Yet every spring, the acequias still ran. The mayordomos still opened the compuertas with the same wooden keys carved in 1755.

The moradas still held their Holy Week ceremonies with drums nobody admitted existed.

The women still lit Friday candles when they thought no one was looking.

And in certain kitchens from Canjilón to Truchas, the old people still told the children: “No dejes que te midan el cielo. La tierra ya sabe quién eres.”

“Don’t let them measure your sky.” The land already knows who you are. The Americans came with chains and stars and left with most of the mountains.

But they never learned how to stop the water.

And water, in the end, remembers everything. That is why, when the Forest Service tried to close the Acequia de los Genízaros in 1998, Rubel Trujillo pulled out the 1754 grant signed by Governor Vélez Cachupín, laid it on the table exactly the way María Rita Quintana had in 1814, and said the sentence that closed the century the Americans thought they had won:“Esta agua no se mide con cadenas de gringos.

Se mide con la sangre de los que la abrieron cuando todavía éramos cautivos.”This water is not measured with gringo chains. It is measured with the blood of those who dug it when we were still captives.” The ranger looked at the yellowed paper, looked at Rubel’s

face, looked at the thirty cousins standing behind him, and left the same day. The sky stayed unmeasured.

The circle stayed unbroken.
And the buffalo, wearing whatever color coat the century demanded, kept walking across the llano inside our chests.

Chapter 13

The Buffalo Came Back Wearing Blue Coats

Fort Stanton, Lincoln County, New Mexico Territory

11 June 1881

Sergeant Moses Williams, 9th Cavalry, Company I, stood on the parade ground watching the supply wagons roll in from Santa Fe. His uniform was dusty, the brass buffalo on his hat glinted in the sun, and the scar across his cheek (earned chasing Victorio through the Black Range) still ached when the wind came off the Capitan Mountains. Across the Río Bonito, on the old road to Picacho, a group of Hispano sheepherders from the Genízaro village of San Patricio watched the same wagons. One of them was my third cousin twice removed, José Dolores Archibeque, thirty-nine years old, great-grandson of the Pawnee boy bought in 1747. They had never met.

They almost did.

San Patricio, Río Bonito Valley

16 August 1881

The dust rose like a prayer nobody answered as Moses Williams led eight troopers down the trail from the foothills.

They had left Fort Stanton at dawn, chasing rumors of Apache scouts slipping through the canyons. Williams rode point, eyes scanning the cottonwoods along the river. The scar burned. He didn't talk about it. Buffalo Soldiers rarely did. Across the water, on a small irrigated patch that had been Genízaro land since before the Americans arrived, José Dolores Archibeque knelt in the chile rows, pulling weeds with hands that still remembered the weight of an old militia lance. His twelve-year-old son squatted beside him. When the hoofbeats came, José Dolores straightened and shaded his eyes.

"Soldados," he told the boy.

The blue column reached the ford. Moses raised a fist; the patrol halted. For a moment, the only sound was the river and the creak of saddle leather. Across twenty yards of brown water, two men looked at each other—two men who carried the same invisible brand: taken from one world, forged in another, now guarding dirt that no longer belonged to either of them.

José Dolores lifted a hand, cautious but unafraid.

“Buenos días.”

Moses nodded, the brim of his hat dipping once.

“Morning. Any Apaches this side?”

The boy translated in a whisper. José Dolores shook his head and pointed west, toward the black mountains.

“Nada aquí. Allá arriba, quién sabe.”

Moses touched his hat brim again. “Obliged.”

He kneed his horse forward. The patrol splashed across, water kicking up around the boots of men who had marched from Louisiana to this valley and would march out again. They passed within spitting distance of the chile field. José Dolores smelled sweat, horse, gun oil—scents his abuela had described from another century, another set of riders.

The column moved on.

Moses and his eight troopers rode into the Cuchillo Negro that afternoon and held off an Apache ambush long enough for the sergeant to earn the Medal of Honor.

Three months later, José Dolores Archibeque lost his last four hundred acres to a Denver lawyer who paid twelve cents an acre and never saw the river.

Two buffalo paths crossed at the ford and kept going.

That near-miss has lived in my chest ever since I found the patrol log in the National Archives and the tax-sale notice in the Tierra Amarilla courthouse on the same yellowed page. I keep thinking about the second their eyes met across the Río Bonito.

Moses Williams, born free in Missouri, was wearing the uniform of a country that still argued whether he was property.

José Dolores Archibeque, carrying the blood of an eight-year-old Pawnee boy, bought for twenty pesos and two mules. Both of them are descendants of people the Comanches once named after the same sacred animal.

Both of them, in the summer of 1881, were riding or watching others ride to keep a frontier safe for men who would steal the land from both before the snow fell.

When Ricque's DNA results came back—17 % Plains Indian, 2 % Ashkenazi, the rest a tangle of everything that tried to erase it—I understood why this story hurts me more than the others. The knot is bigger than Genízaro. It's every captive story that refused to end at the rope. It's Black soldiers riding past Hispano farmers, both of them guarding mountains that would soon belong to neither. It's the llano refusing to choose sides.

Some nights in Canjilón, when the wind smells like dust and old medals, I light two candles on the windowsill instead of one.

One for the taken who wore blue coats.

One for the taken who stayed in the chile rows.

The circle widened just enough to hold them both.

And the buffalo, wearing whatever color the century demanded, kept walking.

The Genízaro villages of the Río Arriba were not marginal "refugee camps." They were the military and cultural shield of the entire province, and within three generations, the descendants of Plains Indian captives became the richest, most land-owning families in northern New Mexico — richer per capita than the old Santa Fe vecindario elite.

Epilogue

The Circle Closes on a Saturday in June

Abiquiú, 14 June 2025

The wedding was set for four in the afternoon, but the plaza was already full by two. Old men in starched white shirts leaned against adobe walls and told the same stories they had told at every baptism, every funeral, every courthouse raid for the last eighty years.

Young women in huipiles, the color of the Piedra Lumbre cliffs carried bouquets of wild sunflowers and Apache plume.

Kids ran between the chairs chasing grasshoppers, shouting in the Spanglish that finally feels like home. Ricque stood under the portal of the old church, barefoot in a simple white dress her abuela Lucy had sewn from wedding lace that had already been married three times before.

Tyler waited at the gate, dark as his Genízaro ancestors, eyes the exact blue his French-Dutch trapper had left in the Chama Valley in 1803. They had asked for no priest, no judge.

Just the people, the land, and the wind. When the sun touched the red cliffs behind the morada, the two of them walked the aisle together (no giving away, no taking, just two descendants of captive children choosing each other). They stopped in front of Joelina and me. Ricque spoke first. “Dad, Mom… we asked everyone here to bring one thing: a stone from the land their family still holds, or lost, or remembers.

We’re going to build the circle right now. “Five hundred people stepped forward, one by one, and laid their stones in a ring around the couple. A river rock from the Nutritas, where José Miguel Archibeque was granted 3,000 varas.

A piece of red shale from the mesa above Truchas, where María Rita Quintana divided the grant among widows.

A chunk of obsidian from the plains of Colorado, where Cuerno Verde fell.

A small white stone from the exact spot in the Abiquiú plaza where an eight-year-old Pawnee boy once had a rope taken off his neck. When the last stone was placed, the circle was perfect. Tyler took Ricque's hands and spoke the only vows they wrote: "We are the children of the taken and the takers, of the bought and the buyers, of the hidden Jews and the hidden Indians,

of the widows who refused to sell and the rebels who refused to kneel. Today, we marry the two halves back together. The circle is closed. The land can rest. "Then they kissed while the sun dropped behind the mesa and every throat in the plaza tightened at once. No one clapped.

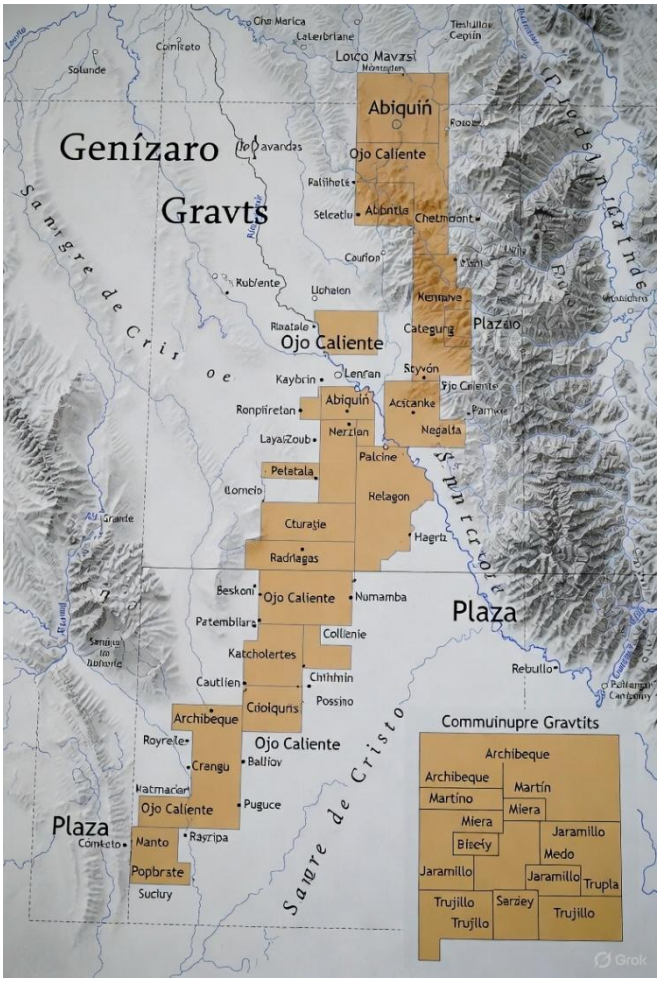
We don't clap at miracles in Abiquiú. We just stood inside the ring of stones and felt the llano finally exhale. Later, when the dancing started, and the matachines came out with their secret feathers flashing under the strings of luces, Joelina leaned against me and whispered the last line of the book I didn't know I had been waiting my whole life to hear: "Mira, amor.

Los cautivos llegaron a la boda." Look, my love.

The captives finally made it to the wedding. And somewhere in the dark beyond the plaza lights, the buffalo walked again, slow and

unhurried, because the circle was whole and the children were home. This time, no one was running.

Figure 2



"Genízaro Grants" Map

Acknowledgments

This book is not mine alone.
It belongs first to the ancestors who carried the rope around their necks and still found a way to plant acequias, raise children, and keep the old songs alive inside new names.
To José Miguel Archibeque, eight years old and barefoot on the llano in 1747, who became the root of so many of us.

To María Gertrudis, seven winters old when the sky changed color, who taught her daughters to listen for buffalo long after the plains were gone.

To every child bought for pesos and mules, every widow who refused to sell the mountain, every militia captain who rode out knowing he might not ride back—thank you for refusing to vanish.

It belongs to the women in kitchens who whispered when the priest wasn't listening, to the great-aunts who lit Friday candles and hushed us when Saturday bells rang, to the old men on the ditch bank who still remember which grandfather killed Cuerno Verde and which grandmother drew the map that saved the grant.

It belongs to the archivists who handed me crumbling pages and said, "Careful, that's somebody's abuela in there."

To the dancers who keep the matachines steps older than the Church admits.

To the mayordomos who still walk the acequia at dawn making sure the water reaches every parcel exactly as the ancestors measured it.

And it belongs to the land itself—
the red cliffs of Abiquiú,
the wind that smells of buffalo grass and piñon smoke,
the llano that never forgot whose children we are.

I only held the pen.
The story was already breathing.
I just wrote it down before it decided to stay quiet again.

—B. C. E.
Canjilón, Winter 2025

Glossary of Terms:

Acequia

A community-built irrigation ditch system brought to New Mexico through Spanish and Moorish engineering but maintained by Genízaro, Pueblo, and Hispano farmers for centuries.

Acequias are not simply water channels; they are systems of communal law, shared labor, inheritance, and environmental stewardship. The *mayordomo* manages water distribution, and ditch cleaning (*la limpia*) is a community obligation that predates the United States.

Alabado

A traditional religious hymn sung in northern New Mexico, often during funerals, Holy Week, or Penitente processions. The melodies blend medieval Spanish Catholic forms with Indigenous cadences and are considered some of the oldest continuously sung songs in the Americas.

Alta California / Nueva Vizcaya / Nuevo México

Spanish administrative regions during different periods.

"Nuevo México" in the 1700s referred to a sparse frontier province stretching from the Río Grande to the plains. "Nueva Vizcaya" covered parts of today's Chihuahua and Durango. "Alta California" was west of the Colorado Plateau. These names appear frequently in colonial documents that shaped Genízaro history.

Bárbaros

A term used by Spanish officials to refer to unconquered or independent Indigenous peoples—especially Comanches, Utes, Navajos, Kiowas, and Apaches.

It meant "outside Spanish control," not "savage," though later English translations added harsher tones.

Casta System

A colonial racial-classification system used by Spain to categorize people based on ancestry. Categories included *español*, *mestizo*, *coyote*, *mulato*, *genízaro*, and *indio*.

These terms shaped taxation, land rights, military service, and legal protections. By the early 1800s, most northern families were simply labeled "español" regardless of ancestry, erasing earlier identities on paper.

Comanche / Apache / Ute / Navajo / Pawnee / Kiowa (General Notes)

Plains and mountain tribal nations from whom many Genízaro ancestors were taken, traded, or integrated.

Their relationships with New Mexico ranged from trade to war to intermarriage. The cultural imprint of these nations—especially through captive children—left deep marks in foodways, dreams, songs, and settlement patterns throughout Río Arriba.

Coyote

A casta category meaning a person of mixed Indigenous and Spanish ancestry, typically used in the 1700s. Like all casta labels, it fluctuated based on politics, appearance, and the desire of the community to protect land or status.

Cuerno Verde

A famed Comanche war leader in the late 1700s, known for his green-painted buffalo horn headdress. His death in 1779 at the hands of Genízaro militia and allied Pueblo and Spanish forces marked a major turning point in northern New Mexico's frontier security.

Ejido

A communal land area used for grazing, hunting, and resource gathering. Genízaro villages often relied on ejidos for survival, and many conflicts with U.S. authorities in the 1800s arose from the loss of communal lands after American legal systems replaced Spanish-Mexican ones.

Encomienda

An early colonial labor-grant system in which Spanish settlers were given rights to Indigenous labor and tribute. It declined in northern New Mexico before the Genízaro period but shaped the early economy and settlement patterns.

Escrito / Petición

Formal written petitions to Spanish or Mexican authorities. Genízaro leaders frequently submitted these to request land, defend acequia rights, seek protection, or attest to long-standing community claims. Many survive in the Spanish Archives.

Genízaro

An Indigenous person—usually a child—integrated into New Mexico through rescate (ransom) or war, baptized into Catholicism, given a Spanish surname, and placed in a frontier settlement.

Genízaros became a distinct cultural group, serving as scouts, soldiers, farmers, and landholders. Over generations, they formed communities with shared traditions blending Plains, Pueblo, and Spanish influences.

By 1820, the term largely disappeared from government documents, though the people and their culture endured.

Hermandad / Penitentes

A lay Catholic brotherhood active in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. Known for Holy Week rituals, community service, and maintaining old hymns and devotions.

Their *moradas* served as both religious centers and cultural archives, preserving traditions that blended Spanish devotional life with Indigenous symbolic structures.

Indio

A colonial administrative category meaning "Indian," used inconsistently. In northern New Mexico, many people labeled *indio* in the early 1700s were labeled *español* by the 1790s.

The shift had more to do with taxation and politics than ethnicity.

Judaísmo Oculto / Crypto-Judaism

Refers to the private preservation of Jewish customs by families whose ancestors were forced to convert during the Spanish Inquisition.

In northern New Mexico, some Friday-night candle traditions, dietary rules, or burial practices survive in families who today identify as Catholic but carry echoes of older customs.

This phenomenon is still being studied and is visible in certain DNA clusters.

Land Grant (Merced de Tierra)

A legal document granting land to a community or individual, issued under Spanish or Mexican authority.

Genízaro communities received numerous grants between 1754 and 1830, often as compensation for military service.

After the U.S. takeover in 1848, many of these grants were ignored, reinterpreted, or invalidated, leading to a century of land-loss struggles.

Llano

The plains.

Physically, the grasslands stretching east of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Spiritually, the ancestral memory of buffalo country carried by Genízaro descendants—especially those whose roots trace to Pawnee, Kiowa, Comanche, or Apache captives.

In stories and dreams, “the llano” is a place of origin and longing.

Matachines

A ritual dance performed in northern New Mexico and parts of Mexico, usually at Christmas, New Year’s, or feast days.

Dancers in masked costumes reenact a symbolic confrontation between forces of chaos and order.

Though often described as “Moorish” in Church records, the dance contains unmistakable Indigenous signatures and is a living example of cultural blending.

Merced Comunitaria / Community Grant

A land grant given not to an individual but to an entire village. These grants often included farmland, communal grazing areas, and watersheds. Genízaro villages managed these lands collectively until American legal systems challenged communal ownership.

Morada

A Penitente meeting house, usually made of thick adobe walls with few windows.

Moradas were spiritual, communal, and political centers, especially in villages where priests visited sporadically or not at all.

Pueblo

Sedentary agricultural villages of distinct Indigenous nations across the region. Pueblo peoples include Tewa, Tiwa, Towa, Keres, Hopi, and Zuni communities.

Genízaro and Pueblo histories overlap in trade, conflict, intermarriage, and shared defense of the northern frontier.

Rescate

The "ransom" system in which Spanish authorities purchased captives—usually children—from Plains tribes.

These captives were then baptized, renamed, and placed with families for upbringing.

The system created the foundation of the Genízaro population.

Río Arriba

Literally "the upper river," referring to the northern counties of New Mexico—Rio Arriba, Taos, parts of Mora and Santa Fe.

This region contains the highest concentration of Genízaro villages and land grants.

It is both a geographical and cultural term.

Santa Cruz de la Cañada / Abiquiú / Truchas / Ojo Caliente / Las Trampas / Canjilón / Tierra Amarilla

Villages central to Genízaro history, many founded as frontier buffer settlements or as land-grant communities. Their plazas,

acequias, dances, and surnames preserve Genízaro culture into the present.

Sangre de Cristo Mountains

The mountain range forming the eastern edge of Genízaro territory.

These mountains served as both refuge and boundary, separating the agricultural villages from the high plains where buffalo-hunting nations traveled.

Serrano / Apache / Jicarilla (Regional Notes)

Subgroups of Apache peoples who lived near or within the boundaries of New Mexico. Many Genízaro families descend from children taken from these groups during raids or rescate markets.

Varas / Vigías / Caballerías

Vara: a Spanish unit of measurement used in land grants (about 33 inches).

Vigía: a lookout or guard, usually stationed on a hill or mesa to watch for raiding parties.

Caballería: a colonial land-measurement unit equal to about 42 acres, often used in grants awarded for military service.

Viudas con Tierra

“Widows with land.”

A term for the women who inherited, managed, and defended Genízaro land grants after their husbands died in frontier campaigns. They became some of the most powerful landowners and community leaders in the Río Arriba.

Yerba

Literally “herb,” but often referring to the medicinal and ceremonial plants gathered in the mountains and arroyos. Knowledge of *yerbas* reflects a fusion of Indigenous Plains, Pueblo, and Spanish herbal traditions.

Panana

(sometimes written Pawnee, Panana, Pana, or Panis in old Spanish documents)

refers to the Pawnee Nation, a powerful Plains Indian tribe whose homeland was in present-day Nebraska and northern Kansas along the Platte, Loup, and Republican Rivers.

Hundreds of Pawnee children entered New Mexico as captives in the 1700s and became foundational ancestors of many Genízaro families in Abiquiú, Truchas, and the Chama Valley.